

LEWISTON TRIBUNE

Northwest students score well in math, reading

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When Kamiah elementary and middle schools were selected to take part in last winter's National Assessment of Educational Progress test, Principal Carrie Nygaard made sure her students were prepared.

"I encouraged every kid to go to bed early and eat right," Nygaard said with a chuckle Wednesday. "We brought popcorn and maple bars. We take it very seriously here and I think you have to. (The professionals who administered the test) were very impressed with our school."

All Nygaard's extra efforts paid off. Even though she won't know exactly how her students performed on the test -- which is known as the national report card and has been touted by President Bush as a national standardized achievement test -- Idaho students overall outperformed the national average.

Washington students also outperformed their counterparts across the country.

Results of the national test in math and reading, which was given last February through March to a sampling of fourth- and eighth-graders across the country, were released by the National Assessment Governing Board Wednesday. Schools do not get the results for their individual performance but the information is used as part of a national database.

The performance of Idaho's fourth-graders was strong compared to two years ago when the state participated in the test.

Idaho's eighth-graders overall also scored above the national average.

Idaho has focused on improving middle school math instruction through the Idaho Math Academy, an intensive weeklong training that reaches about 130 middle school teachers each year.

Idaho's direct math assessment also provides a tool to help measure the complex higher-level math skills required on the national assessment.

In Washington the strongest gains were in mathematics with fourth- and eighth-graders scoring significantly higher than in 2003.

Washington students also showed improvements in reading over two years ago.

When looking at the test results by racial group, Washington black students outperformed the nation by a significant margin.

Although Idaho's Hispanic students scored about the same as their U.S. counterparts, they were still below the overall average.

Bill Motsenbocker, principal of Lincoln Middle School at Pullman, said his staff has been focusing on ways to bring up math scores among middle school students.

Lincoln did not participate in the 2005 national assessment.

Six years ago the school eliminated its traditional sixth-grade math curriculum because it was similar to the fifth-grade curriculum, Motsenbocker said. Then it slid the sixth- through 10th-grade curriculums down one year so now most eighth-graders finish Algebra 1 before they go to high school.

"We've found our math scores showed significant gains and that's been a real positive move for us," Motsenbocker said.

Some students still struggle with the redesigned curriculum. Motsenbocker said students who are in special education have programs to address their needs.

"But we still have students who struggle and they were the same students who struggled before," he said. "So it's benefited a lot of kids and the same students who struggled (before) still struggle."

Principal Nygaard said at Kamiah's middle school, whose student population includes about 10 percent to 15 percent minority students, her staff has made a special effort to include cultural studies and activities in the curriculum. Teachers work hard to make sure all students finish their work and tests.

"I think that our kids know and understand their education is important," Nygaard said. "We've had better parental involvement and we sure hope all the time that all walks of life feel that this is their school and take ownership in that."

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